

Luke 2:1-14 “The Christmas Census Consensus”

Dr. Jeffery L. Hamm, PhD
ChristChurch Presbyterian, Atlanta

As required by the Constitution, the U.S. Census has been conducted every ten years since 1790. The new year, 2020, is the next for the census. The U.S. population is projected to be 334,000,000. In our text today, we find a census conducted in the Roman Empire, the results of which reveal the true meaning of Christmas. We learn that *since God gives His peace to those with whom He is pleased then you should believe in His Son so that you might not perish but have eternal life.*

Context

Luke writes his gospel in the early 60's of the first century Roman Empire. Luke's original reader is Theophilus (1:3), a high-ranking official in the Roman government probably a Roman governor. Why does Luke write? Verse 4, *that you many have **certainty** concerning the things you have been taught.* Theophilus is uncertain of the Christian message. He harbors some doubt. To begin with, Jesus' birth. So Luke sets the context of Jesus' birth in a concrete time of which Theophilus would have been aware.

Census

Verse 1, *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus.* Augustus is grandnephew of Julius Caesar whom he adopted as his son. After the murder of Julius Caesar, Augustus becomes emperor in 27 BC. He restored the *Pax Romana*—the peace of Rome—by uniting the empire. A brilliant emperor. His real name is Gaius Octavius, known to English speakers as Octavian. Upon rising to the throne, the Roman senate changes his name to *Augustus*, which means “majestic, highly revered.” In other words, Augustus is viewed as a god. He accepts the title of Pontifex Maximus, the “Highest Priest.” The Roman army burns incense to Caesar, temples are built in honor of Augustus. In the eyes of the citizens, Caesar is Lord. Augustus is god.

One fine day, probably a Monday, Augustus decides the empire needs more money. So what does he do? Verse 1, *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.* The emperor issues a decree, an imperial order. Augustus passes a new law. The decree enforces the registration of the whole world. This registration is a government census for the purpose of taxation. KJV, *...there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be counted and taxed.* The reason for the census is to collect tax money. Once the IRS gets your name, then they know whom to gouge. It is Dec. 15, not April 15th. Why are we talking about taxes? Because the census is a significant event in the Roman Empire about which Theophilus would know. Luke shows that the birth of Jesus is not unsubstantiated myth, legend. His birth occurs in a real time and in a real place in recorded history. For Theophilus, history can't hide the census.

It effected everyone. Verse 3, *And all went to be registered, each to his own town.* The most efficient method by which Caesar can register the world is to require folk to go to the town of family origin, the hometown of their ancestors. Caesar gets a better census. If you

currently live in the big city of Atlanta, the IRS may not know that you even exist. The IRS knows the names of families in the small towns of Georgia, in Macon, Moultrie. By ordering everyone back to the family hometown, the IRS can determine who from the Smith family isn't paying taxes. So the decree causes total upheaval in the empire. Life totally interrupted. A Jew may be living in Corinth. Now he must sail the Mediterranean to return to Israel. He misses work, travel is expensive. Hotels are booked full.

Joseph and Bethlehem

There is one such man living in the boondocks of the empire who is effected by Caesar's decree. *Verse 4, And Joseph also went up from Galilee to Judea, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David.* Here is this one Joseph; a lowly man whom Caesar has no idea even exists. He is an obscure, unknown descendant of King David. As David was from Bethlehem, Joseph's lineage lies in Bethlehem, therefore Joseph must return to the city of David because of the decree. Yet Joseph has no desire whatsoever to travel to Bethlehem. Why? *Verse 5, [he went] to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.* Joseph is engaged to Mary, a very pregnant teenager; late in her third trimester and ready to give birth. So Joseph dreads the decree, because his pregnant fiancée dreads the idea of a trip to Bethlehem. I can assert this with great authority because I lived with a pregnant woman once. From my experience, I can assure you that a very pregnant Mary does not want to go one step out of her way. As the crow flies, Bethlehem is 90 miles away. But any devout Jew living in Galilee, takes the TransJordan route to Judah. Samaria lies between Nazareth and Bethlehem. Samaritans, for the Jew, are a scummy people-group. So they take the Jordan bypass, go through Jordan to go around Samaria. It is a long arduous journey. For these poor people, they either walk or ride a donkey. Mary is not too enthusiastic about a trip to Bethlehem. They don't go because one day Joseph grows tired of Nazareth and says, "Hey, let's move to Bethlehem. It has better weather." Going to Bethlehem is not their idea. They leave only because they must. It is the law. The emperor's decree. Had Augustus not decreed the census, Mary certainly would remain in Nazareth, give birth in the comfort of her own home. Yet Caesar just happens to issue this decree, and Joseph takes Mary to Bethlehem, there she gives birth.

The location is very significant. 700 years before Christ is born, the prophet Micah foretells that the city of the Messiah's birth is Bethlehem. *2 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times"* (Mic. 5:2). On the surface, it looks like Christ is born in Bethlehem only because of Caesar's decree, but when we dig deeper, we see Christ is born in Bethlehem because of God's decree. There is another decree at work here besides Caesar's. Two decrees in effect simultaneously. Caesar's decree and God's. Caesar's census decree working in consensus with God's eternal decree. Shorter Catechism #7: What are the decrees of God? "The decrees of God are His eternal plan, according to the counsel of His own will, whereby, for His own glory, He has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass." God is free and bound to nothing. So free that He decrees whatsoever comes to pass. So that not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from His will. Nothing comes to pass apart from God's decree. Even Caesar's decree. *The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; He directs it like a watercourse wherever He pleases* (Prov. 21:1).

Notice the situation. Before the foundation of the world, God decrees that the birthplace of Christ is Bethlehem. Micah prophecies this 700 years before Christ is born. Yet Joseph and Mary live in Nazareth. Is this a problem? No. For God moves in the heart of Caesar. Augustus issues a decree, and the whole Roman empire is thrown into upheaval just to get Mary to Bethlehem where she can give birth right in the nick of time. Just in order to fulfill what was predicted by the prophet. Augustus, in all of his pomp and power as Emperor of Rome, only does what God decrees for him to accomplish. Do you see the irony? The empire believes that Caesar is a god. The census of the whole world assumes Augustus' control over it, his sovereignty. "Hail, Caesar. Caesar is lord Augustus is god." Meanwhile, Augustus, the false god, is being used by the true and living God, like a servant to execute Yahweh's decree. Caesar issues a decree, but only because in eternity past God issues the decree for Caesar to decree. The world believes that Caesar is god. But he is not. His own decree declares it.

A Savior

So Jesus is born in Bethlehem. On that night, around Bethlehem, shepherds are keeping their flocks. Like every other night, boring. It is a Silent Night. Then suddenly an angel appears. *Verse 9, And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.* They're terrified because, standing right before them is the angel of the Lord. Here is a majestic creature just dispatched from the throne of God, glowing in the darkness as he is still reflecting the blinding light that radiates from God's majestic being. While they are waiting for their hearts to start beating again, the angel makes an announcement. *Verse 10, ...I bring you good news of great joy...For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.* The most urgent message in the history of humanity. Good news of a Savior. This is a very interesting title for the Child: *Savior*. In the gospels, this title is only used twice. Here and in Jn. 4:42. We use it so commonly that the title loses some of its implication. What does it imply? For the child to be a Savior, implies that the human race desperately needs salvation. In other words, each and every one of us are totally depraved.

That is the teaching of Scripture from the beginning. Man sinned against God in the garden by eating the forbidden fruit. Though God had warned him, in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die. And Adam did die that day, spiritually. Ever since then, every person born has been born spiritually dead. Just like we inherit genetic traits from our parents, we inherited the original sin of our first father Adam. We are born spiritually dead. That is why Jesus tells Nicodemus, *unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of heaven* (Jn. 3:3). One must be born spiritually because in our physical birth we are born into a state of spiritual death. Paul writes, *And you were dead in your trespasses and sins* (Eph. 1:1). What can a dead person do for himself? Dead people cannot save themselves. They cannot choose to save themselves. They don't know that they're dead, not conscious of their state of death. They need a Savior, who comes not to make salvation possible—but definite. A Savior who definitely saves those whom He chooses by sending the Holy Spirit to regenerate their hearts and give new birth to them as new creatures. That is a Savior!

Now He is born. This doesn't mean that at this moment in time the Savior begins to exist. For He has existed from eternity. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God* (Jn. 1:1). The eternal Logos, the divine Son of God has always existed,

but at this point in time, He is born of a woman. The Savior enters the human race. He puts on human flesh. *The word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory* (Jn. 1:14). The eternal Son of God takes to Himself a human nature and walks among people. It is the pivotal event in the history of the world.

Sign

That is the announcement. The God-Man of prophecy is born. Of course, there is just one little problem. Who is going to believe it? It seems too incredible. So the angel offers the shepherds a sign. *Verse 12, And this will be a sign for you:* What does that mean? A sign? Some think a sign is a proof. Demonstrable, verifiable, empirical evidence that would serve as proof which allows one to attain rational certainty. Leaving no doubt. For example, in Jesus' earthly ministry, His enemies ask Him for a sign to prove His claim to be the Messiah. "Show us a sign." They assume that if they see a sign then they'll believe. But they're wrong. Totally naïve about their condition of sin and spiritual death. For a sign is viewed either through the eyes of faith or unfaith. When Jesus performed signs and wonders, that is, miracles, there are those who are eyewitnesses that refuse to believe. For example, He cast demons out of a blind and mute man. He is instantly healed, seeing and speaking. No one denies that the miracle occurred. It was sensational. Everyone is left amazed. But how do some explain it? "He casts out demons by the power of Beelzebul. He is league with Satan. He is a sorcerer, not Son!" A sign is seen either through the eyes of belief or unbelief.

What we learn here. *Verse 12, And this will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.* The angels offer a sign. But what kind of sign is this? Sure, on a superficial level, the sign might help identify the child over against all the other infants in Bethlehem who are born in nice warm homes. But does it really help them believe the message itself? What are they going to find? A babe wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger. Swaddling cloths are rough rags. A manger is a feeding trough for barnyard animals located in a stinking stable. Do you see the problem this presents? It is totally counterintuitive. It doesn't meet expectations. It shatters assumptions. If the baby is really the Christ, one would expect to find Him born in a palace. Lying in an ornate golden bed, not a feeding trough. Snuggled in a purple gown, not rough rags. Yet they're not even going to find him in a middle-class home, in a cute nursery with animals painted on the wall, in a nice warm crib, monitored under a video camera. Instead, He is found in a manger. Will they believe it? The Savior, the Son of God Christ, the divine Warrior-King, born to peasant parents? Lying in feeding trough in a stinking stable? According to their pre-conceived idea, who would believe it?

Do we see what kind of sign the manger is? Simeon tells us in the same chapter of Luke. After the manger scene, Jesus is presented at the temple. The prophet Simeon is there waiting. He takes the child in his arms and asserts, "*Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed*" (Lk. 2:35). The manger is a sign of opposition, offense. "The cradle and the cross are hewn of the same wood" (Luther). Christ's crib and His cross are hewn of the same wood. They serve the same role, theologically. What kind of sign is the cross? *Jews ask for signs, Greeks search for wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, A stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks.* The cross is scandalous to scientists and folly to philosophers. Christ's crib presents the same offense as His cross. The manger is offensive. We lose that perspective. We sing fondly of the manger. "Away in a manger no room for a bed. The little Lord Jesus lay down His sweet head." But we must understand, for the

world, the manger is offensive. *A stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks.* Scandalous to scientists and folly to philosophers.

In other words, the manger is a sign that demands a decision. The shepherds must decide about the news. For in order to find the Child in the manger, they must believe the news, *then* search for Him. If they don't believe the news, then they will never seek the Child to begin with. They'll just go back to sleep. Stay warm by the fire. In order to find the Child in swaddling cloths, they must believe in Him. Faith comes first. They only see the sign *after* they believe the news. The sign becomes significant only when seen through the eyes of faith. One must believe in order to perceive the sign. Signs, miracles are a double-edged sword. They function like parables. The function of a parable is to provide greater understanding for those with ear to hear. But greater misunderstanding for those who are spiritually deaf. Like the parables, signs function to provide more clarity for those with eyes to see, but more obscurity for the spiritually blind who demand sight, so that seeing, they do not see. The sign becomes significant only when seen through the eyes of faith. So if you are uncertain about the virgin birth, if you harbor doubts, then you need not ask for more evidence to help you believe. If you are not going to believe the Word, then you're not going to believe the evidence. If you don't believe the Word of God then you'll not believe the work of God. Look at it! Feeding trough, rough rags. The eternal Son of God lying in a feeding trough, wrapped in rough rags? The sign is scandalous for scientist, folly for philosophers. Who would really believe it?

Pleasure and Peace

As soon as the angel tells the shepherds of the sign, an army of angels invades the night sky. Bring tidings. *Verse 14, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased."* Here in this one verse is the theme of the Bible: Redemption of a people to the glory of God, for the glory of God. The glory of God is the meaning of life. Shorter Catechism 1: "What is the chief end of man?" What is chief purpose of mankind? For what reason does humanity exist? What is the meaning of life? The answer, "To glorify God and enjoy Him forever." The angels begin their tidings focused on the glory of God.

Notice what the glory of God invites. *Verse 14, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace.* The angels bring tidings of peace. Peace can be a confusing message, particularly during war. The United States has been embroiled in a war in the Mid-East for 18 years. People protest for peace. But the peace here does not refer to the absence of war. The angels do not declare a message about world peace. For that would contradict Jesus' claim, *Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword* (Matt. 10:34). The peace in view is not peace on earth, but peace with God, peace between God and man, peace between God and the human race. Without Christ, there is no peace, only enmity. This is the basis of the gospel. *10 For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life!* (Rom. 5). Before conversion, we were God's enemies. The natural man, the unconverted man, is an enemy of God. Whether one realizes that or not. The Creator demands allegiance. If one does not love and adore Him, then one lives in defiance of Him as an enemy. For whom God reserves His wrath. There is enmity between God and man.

But now because of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, we can have peace with God. What we are about to sing. *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing:* "Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled." This is the message of the angels. The gospel is the message of peace with God. "God and sinners reconciled." No longer enemies. Peace between the two parties.

Yet this peace is not for every person on earth. Verse 14, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.*" Not every person receives God's peace. God's peace is extended only to those with whom He is pleased. That means there are those with whom He is pleased. There are those with whom He is not pleased. What is the difference? *6 And without faith it is impossible to please God...* (Heb. 11:6). The people with whom God is pleased are those *who believe that he exists and that He rewards those who seek Him*. By faith in His Son. Those only are the ones to whom God the Father gives peace. Those who believe in His Son. Some take the Christmas message of peace and apply it universally, so that Christmas becomes a time for everyone to be happy and cheerful. Even those who have no desire for God's peace. Yet Jesus was not born so that we have a holly-jolly holiday. Jesus was not born so that everyone could sentimentally roast chestnuts by an open fire. Jesus was born to bring peace by dying on the cross in order to absorb God's wrath otherwise directed at those who would believe in Him. To bring peace by atoning for their sin and rebellion. That is the purpose of His birth. For the human race in its natural condition is not pleasing to God. He is not pleased with unconverted humanity. Therefore He doomed it to destruction. That means, for the unbeliever, there is no such thing as a merry Christmas. There is no reason to ever be merry about anything.

But there is good news of great joy. A Child is born. A Savior who comes to save from God's wrath and anger. A reason to be merry. To have a merry Christmas, merry life, and merry life eternal. That is the Christmas message. *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.*" Confirm His pleasure by your faith. Amen.